

Aunt Gilla

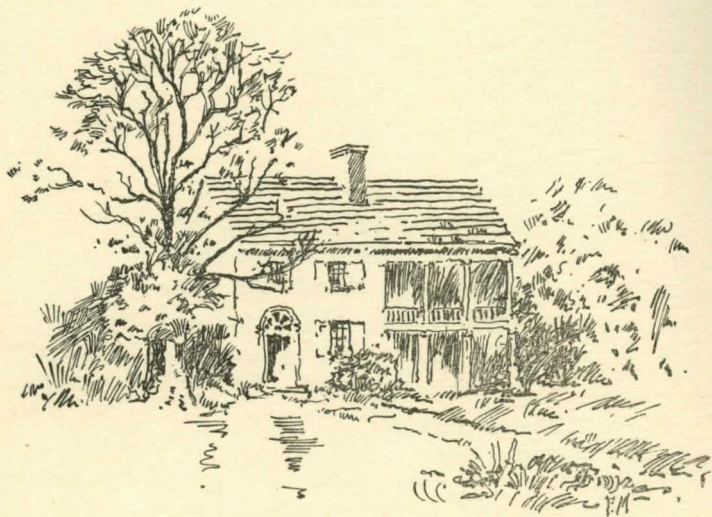
A TALE OF OLD BARDSTOWN



AUNT CILLA

*Because the story of Aunt Cilla
is not fiction but a beautiful fact,
I dedicate its telling to her memory
with the hope that it will prove
helpful to many of her race and
mine.*

*Bardstown, Kentucky
September, 1921.*



THE OLD HOWELL HOME.

Drawing by F. L. Morgan.

Aunt Cilla

A Tale of Old Bardstown

All the older people in Bardstown and many of the middle-aged remember the old Howell home.

It was not a conspicuous place, but it was unusual. It stood slightly back from one of the principal streets, a rather long-fronted frame building, its original white, weather-toned to a fine, soft gray, and it had an odd inset porch across it partly enclosing a stairway leading to the floor above.

There was a wide ribbon of grass between it and the street; a smoke tree stood near the gate, old rose bushes welcomed with outstretched arms the blooming seasons, and a purple magnolia tree in the spring spread a misty veil of color above the pavement leading to the porch. The pavement itself was sunken in spots, and grass grew in little wistful outcroppings between its unresponsive bricks.

In the early '70's three women occupied the house—Mrs. Howell, her grand-daughter, Miss Mattie, and Aunt Cilla, the negro maid. Mrs. Howell was advanced in years and never left the place; for the most part, as she is now remembered, she sat in her own front room below stairs, and occupied herself with her quilt pieces or other

light handiwork by the window looking out on the magnolia tree and beyond to the street with its cheerful, moving life.

Miss Mattie, who taught, was the spirited member of the family, but, having threaded many needles to employ her grandmother's busy fingers during her own absence, she left the house daily soon after breakfast, and when she had closed the gate, the place seemed to settle down into a reminiscent quiet befitting the old landmark that it was.

It was after the gate had closed behind Miss Mattie's issuing feet that Aunt Cilla emerged, so to speak, from obscurity and came into her own. Busied about her "Ol' Miss" as she always called Mrs. Howell, or in the care of the house, or looking after the roses that were her delight, and singing fitfully in the fervid fashion of the negro, she furnished the place a presence, unobtrusive but unique.

Past middle age, a woman of average height, rather stout in build, she united in her appearance and evinced in her mental make-up the characteristics of both the Negro and Indian races. Of a color lighter than the African, though not precisely that of the Red man, she possessed wavy, not kinky, hair, a straight nose and eyes whose flash caused many an offender to retreat before them. It was a surmise rather than a certainty that Aunt Cilla's grandmother was an Indian

squaw, but in that surmise she herself placed implicit confidence.

From early childhood she had been a part of the Howell household; she could remember nothing previous to that, and her devotion to her mistress was an absorbing passion.

Mrs. Howell, being a Presbyterian of the old time, positive type, Cilla had been taught the principles of that faith with scrupulous regard, and had united with the church of which her mistress was a member. Across the inner front of the church was a gallery reached by stairs from the vestibule, and in this gallery space was reserved for the few negro members of the congregation. Here, therefore, Cilla sat and listened from time to time to the Word as it was preached by ministers of no mean reputation, and it was a matter of pride with her that she shared a place in the church with her mistress and had a part in the services dear to her pious heart.

Why Cilla had never married had been a matter of speculation many a time with those who knew the capability and character of the woman. That she had not lacked opportunity, at least a few felt sure; probably a smaller number knew that her reason was the devotion she felt for Mrs. Howell, that could contemplate no separation from her of long duration. While she was a young woman a negro by the name of Stephen Thomas had offered her his hand and heart in

due form, but Cilla's answer had been decisive and sustained: "No, *sir*," that answer ran, "I ain't goin' to leave my Mist's fer *nobody*." In spite of the accent on the Sir, Stephen waited, hoping, but Cilla held to her position.

Years came and went; the young roses grew old and stocky and rugged; the purple magnolia spread itself; the master of the house, Col. Howell, died and the young mistresses were married and moved to distant States, but Aunt Cilla, as she now came to be generally called, clung as tenaciously as in former days to the woman she not only served but loved.

It was not till she herself had become a woman long past middle age that her argument against Stephen's persuasions became surmountable.

When Mrs. Howell, after a brief illness, died and it was apparent that the house would be for at least a time deserted, Aunt Cilla realized the loneliness she had long dreaded, and a sort of terror seized her. Where, when this home closed, would she find another? Employment she could find readily, but where the confidence and the affection that she now must surely miss?

The waiting Stephen offered a prompt solution; he renewed his long-ago rejected suit and this time Cilla acquiesced—with one unique reservation: she positively refused to give up the name of Howell.

"Stephen," she said, "I ain't goin' to change

my name to no Thomas. I knew a nigger once by the name er Thomas that went to the Penter-tench'ry, an' I ain't goin' to have nobody mixin' me up with *him*. I been Cilla Howell all my life, an' Cilla Howell I jis got to stay. You kin take me and my name, or you can leave my name an' me with it, but you can't take it away from me," and Stephen, having gained his chief point, was so inclined to leniency that he took her, name and all, being thenceforward known as Stephen Howell, an arrangement apparently satisfactory to both.

Soon after the death of Mrs. Howell the old home was purchased by Mr. William Carothers, one of the leading business men of the town who shortly moved into it with his family, consisting of his wife and a young son and daughter. Mrs. Carothers needed a responsible woman to help her care for the children, and naturally Aunt Cilla, so identified with the place, was suggested as a suitable person.

Mr. Carothers himself sought her out and talked the matter over with her, and the result was that again the doors of her old home opened to receive her. So that, in no great time after, she, with her faithful Stephen, was there re-established.

Whether the matrimonial career of Aunt Cilla was destined to be tranquil, or tempestuous, there was scarce time for her friends to speculate upon, for several years later Uncle Stephen died, and

Aunt Cilla walked thenceforth the single path of widowhood. If, however, she had evinced small enthusiasm over marriage—she never had declared any great affection for Stephen—there was no doubt in any mind of her respect for him and there was no lack of its evidence in her conduct.

His funeral was conducted with dignity in the church of which he was, with her, a member, and he was accorded every appropriate rite. At the head of Stephen's coffin stood the Carothers children, whose singing was possibly the most striking feature of the service; it was doubtless the most grateful and comforting part of it to Aunt Cilla herself, as from their lips there issued in soft childish tones the music and the words peculiarly dear to her.

"O, how I love Jesus,
O, how I love Jesus,
O, how I love Jesus,
Because He first loved me."

A spacious lot in the town cemetery had been purchased with a considerable portion of the two hundred dollars left Aunt Cilla by the will of Mrs. Howell. In this lot Uncle Stephen was buried and in due time a stone was set there bearing these simple words:

"Stephen Howell,
Died March 25, 1876.
Aged about 74 years.
Erected by
Priscilla Howell."

Aunt Cilla wished to leave no uncertainty in any mind that it was she and none other who had erected Stephen's monument. As the years went by one after another of her negro friends making suitable request of her was granted the privilege of laying away a relative in this lot; it was looked upon as a coverted spot and its capacity was used to the limit. This lot, this stone of memorial and a black alpaca dress, which she kept till the day of her death, about exhausted Aunt Cilla's legacy, but they were purchases that gave her enduring satisfaction.

Trees long past their maturity, even in advancing age and apparently not far from their extreme limit of life, are sometimes known to blossom with their younger neighbors and yield an unusual fruitage. An analagous case was that of Aunt Cilla. Transplanted at an age when activity is generally succeeded by inertia, this woman, now elderly, re-established in her old home, but with new surroundings, entered upon a fresh career of vitality and usefulness. If, in the dusks of evening and in the lonely night hours the spirits of the departed kept spectral company with hers, she gave no sign when the day's return brought back the day's activities, but with surprising adaptability adjusted herself to the unwonted claims now pressing upon her; and especially did she give a whole-hearted service to the children who were her chief care and her unfailing delight.

When, later, other babies appeared in the family, the old heart of Aunt Cilla opened out the wider and she held out willing hands to the little forms committed to her arms. And how she grew to love them and how in turn they looked to her with trustful eyes that were never disappointed is part of history—her history and theirs.

For nearly ten years the family life, of which she had now become thoroughly a part, moved on in comparative tranquility. To a certain extent Aunt Cilla transferred the attachment she had manifested for her "Ol' Miss" to her younger employer, and this attachment became and remained a mutual one. Mrs. Carothers had implicit confidence in Aunt Cilla's faithfulness, and to the children she was a reservoir of entertainment as well as a refuge in need, so that her place became one of adviser and arbiter as well as attendant and servitor. Respect for her was inculcated, but affection for her was spontaneous and both were abiding.

But a slowly deepening shadow was settling over the home and Aunt Cilla's wise old eyes were filling with sympathetic apprehension. Mrs. Carothers was failing in health, more and more depending on the valiant old heart of Aunt Cilla for service, and as they looked into each other's faces, though little was said by either, the truth was recognized by both.

In the last frail, fading days, however, the



LITTLE CATHERINE.

mother heart cried out irrepressibly, and both were moved to adequate speech. They were together alone save for Catherine, bewitching in her two-year-old winsomeness, and the mother's eyes were upon her yet full of distress; Aunt Cilla spoke:

"Miss Sue," she said, "I know you'se grievin' 'bout somp'in—what's on your mind?" And the mother cried out, "My baby! Aunt Cilla, my baby! Who will take care of her?"

It was then that Aunt Cilla rose to new heights. "I will, Miss Sue," she said, "I will! Ain't I been takin' keer er her ever since she wuz bo'n? An' ain't I goin' to look after her long as I live? Ain't she my baby, too?"

"O, Aunt Cilla," the mother begged. "Live! You must live, and take care of her till she is grown, won't you?"

And Aunt Cilla replied with the solemnity of an oath, "I'll stick by her till death parts us, Miss Sue." Then the mother said gently, putting the tiny Catherine into the arms held out for her, "There, Aunt Cilla, take your baby."

Years after, as Aunt Cilla told the little girl of that scene, she said, "An' right there I took your little white han' in my big ol' brown paw and axed the Lord to let me live till you got to be eighteen."

And the mother, comforted with the promise, found a new peace that a few days later merged

into the peace that passeth all understanding. When the end was nearly come, she called the older children about her and gave them her last injunctions, obedience to Aunt Cilla being one of them, and of her she said, "She will always be your good friend." And no one ever better fulfilled a prophecy.

Vigilance and affection were inseparably united thenceforth in the care given her young charges by this woman now venerable. No lynx was ever more watchful, no mother-love more untiring. To her babies, as she called them, she was tenderness itself. Sleeping in the room with them, no frightened wail from one of them ever failed to rouse her, and getting up, she would sit beside the cowering little soul, its hand in hers, till peace came back in sleep.

Nothing so roused her wrath as a slighting remark, or one she so construed, to one of her children; and the boys of the neighborhood knew full well when, after exciting her ire, it were safer to retire than to further offend her.

As the children advanced in years the respect suitable to their ages she accorded them voluntarily. When they reached the age of fifteen, they were addressed as "Mr." Bob, and "Miss" Ella, and to their surprised queries as to the unwonted dignity Aunt Cilla replied with prompt decision:

"You're growin' up now, an' I'm goin' to

show these other niggers 'round here what's proper. I ain't goin' to have them treatin' you with disrespec'," and she was punctilious to the last.

Birthdays she always remembered and celebrated in some way. The plum trees in the side yard spread a white canopy in spring and a green one later on whose shade afforded a favorite spot for such festivities; and there would be cake and fun, the former at times provided out of her own slender means. How she would have liked to see them making merry in some such fashion every day!

They are laughing yet—her children—and telling their children of times when they and the little people from neighboring homes would congregate occasionally in a large upper room and sit in a charmed silence about Aunt Cilla while she spun—largely from her own imagination—marvellous tales that held them spellbound; and in the hand of each rapt listener appeared, sole and sufficient refreshment, young onions from their own garden! What was scent or taste compared with the thrills evoked by this story wizard? The wand was hers and they were for that hour a charmed circle docile to her mood.

Could she have had her way the children would have fared sumptuously and disported themselves in fine apparel every day; as the modest means of the home denied such luxury, Aunt Cilla did

her best to keep them content with their lot, whatever that was, but sometimes she found it impossible to repress her own longings for their enjoyments, and then she would launch out into some special treat that she herself paid for; indeed this tendency so threatened to become a habit that Mr. Carothers had to remonstrate very firmly with her on the subject.

Devotion of this kind is usually intolerant of discipline. In the Carothers family obedience was inculcated from infancy and principles were taught that were matters of daily acceptance; usually Aunt Cilla was thoroughly awake to the importance of training the children and she had great respect for the head of the house, but woe to any exercise of authority that she did not recognize as legitimate—and there are several remembered occasions when even the father's discipline evoked a remonstrance not less pronounced because expressed in few words or in the flash of her indignant eyes. The baby, Catherine, was naturally the one on whom her tenderness was most intensely concentrated, and when the child, half-grown, had typhoid fever and was so ill that trained nurses had to displace Aunt Cilla's never wearying care, those nurses told the family that no matter how early in the morning they might undo the outer door of the room in which the sufferer lay, Aunt Cilla would be crouching there and her eager question was always the same: "How is my baby?"

Years after the death of Mrs. Howell one of her grandsons came to Bardstown delegated by his family to bring Aunt Cilla back with him to a Western city to make her home for the remainder of her days.

Aunt Cilla listened to the proffer, but there was no hesitation in her decision. She had cast her lot with the Carothers family, the children were hers in all save blood, and she loved them with a loyalty that anticipated no breaking till that of the final relinquishment.

The years came and went—for the children they meant growth, development, outlook into a widening horizon. For her they brought a slower and more uneven step, a shorter breath, a form more bowed, and an outlook presenting no rosier earthly future. Now and then, struggle against it as she might, acute attacks of sickness came and the end seemed almost in sight. At these times, however, the thing that seemed to distress her most was the fright and the pain she gave the children—now, indeed, children only to her. To see her who had been their refuge and tower of comfort prostrated and in danger was to them a distracting grief, and one they voiced in pitiful wails, imploring her not to leave them. After such scenes she would say, "I jis hope when I die I'll be all by myself. I don't want to see you all a-cryin' and hollerin' aroun' me like that."

Did some ministering angel, listening, make note of the wish, and would it find fulfillment?

As her infirmities increased and it became more and more difficult for her to climb to her upstairs room, Mr. Carothers had a room in the yard made ready for her, where she could enter into the enjoyment of the outer world without undue exertion and where her friends and the family had easy access to her.

There, after a time, compelling weakness put her to bed and an elderly negro woman, Aunt Clarissy, was engaged to stay with and look after her. One day as Aunt Clarissy stood at the window looking out on the yard and silent, Aunt Cilla began to sing. It was a crooning little song:

"O, how I love Jesus,
O, how I love Jesus,
O, how I love Jesus,
Because He first loved me."

How often she had rocked the babies to sleep with it, holding them close clasped to the heart that had known no baby love but theirs! The words came from lips that trembled a little,

"O—how—I—love—"

The sound trailed off and stopped. "Go on, Cilla," Aunt Clarissy encouraged, "Go on, I'm listenin'," but the song had ended and the singer, brave, patient, tender soul, had joined the company of those who, having been faithful unto death, are promised a crown of life and songs of victory.

And her release had come on the day that Catherine became eighteen. Was it a happening or an answered prayer?

No sincerer affection ever voiced itself than did that of the Carothers family for the woman who had mothered them for so many years. Father and son, summoned hastily from their business, stood by the bed on which her still form lay, and were no less manly for the tears that shone on their faces. The eldest daughter, now teaching twenty miles away, was telephoned to and left her school to come home to Aunt Cilla for the last time. The sisters and an intimate friend made with loving hands the garments for her long repose.

In the old Presbyterian Church not far away a congregation that packed the house gathered to pay respect to her memory. Music and flowers and appropriate speech were all there, and the white and the negro races gave equal ear and equal tribute.

The Bardstown Cemetery spreads its peaceful acres out behind a row of cedars that shield it from the public highway. On its further edge was the lot in which the dust of Uncle Stephen had lain for many years. The sun in its shining knew no difference between that lot and any other, and over them all its balm was being poured. But the little group that followed Aunt Cilla to her resting place paused near the main entrance

to the cemetery and there in the Carothers lot she was laid away. Not even death was to divide her from those to whom she had given for twenty-four years a mother-love service. "When I die," she had said to them, "I want to be buried there—at the feet of my babies." But their love for her planned otherwise and better, for she was placed where, joined since by one and another of the family, she lies among them side by side.

LOUISE J. SPEED.

